

VI. THE STEREO ERA

In 1954, a timid and uncertain record industry took the plunge to begin investing heavily in stereophonic sound. They were not timid and uncertain because they didn't know if their system would work – as we have seen, they had already been experimenting with and working the kinks out of stereo sound since 1932 – but because they still weren't sure how to make a home entertainment system that could play a stereo record. Nevertheless, they all had their various equipment in place, and so that year they began tentatively to make recordings using the new medium.

RCA started, gingerly, with “alternate” stereo tapes of monophonic recording sessions. Unfortunately, since they were still uncertain how the results would sound on home audio, they often didn't mark and/or didn't file the alternate stereo takes properly. As a result, the stereo versions of Charles Munch's first stereo recordings – Berlioz' “Roméo et Juliette” and “Symphonie Fantastique” – disappeared while others, such as Fritz Reiner's first stereo recordings (Strauss' “Also Sprach Zarathustra” and the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1 with Arthur Rubinstein) disappeared for 20 years. Oddly enough, their prize possession, Toscanini, was not recorded in stereo until his very last NBC Symphony performance, at which he suffered a mental lapse while conducting. None of the performances captured on that date were even worth preserving, let alone issuing, and so posterity lost an opportunity to hear his last half-season with NBC in the excellent sound his artistry deserved.

Columbia was even less willing to pursue stereo. Not even one session was recorded experimentally in the new medium for that company until 1957, by which point everyone was getting in on the act. But Columbia was scarcely alone in this respect. American Decca, EMI, Philips and DGG all avoided stereo recording like the plague. It is ironic when one considers what a revolution this was that initial reaction was so tentative, but that is just the way it happened.

The one label that embraced the new technology was British Decca. During the LP era, they changed the name on their American product from “Decca” to “London” records so as not to be confused with the American label, which was now issuing classical product at a fairly steady rate. They began making stereo recordings as early as 1954, and for commercial issue to boot – even if there still wasn't a reliable playback mechanism for the new sound. Thus, while other European and American labels were still skirting the issue and keeping stereo sessions to the experimental stage, London was fully conversant with the technology and jargon associated with stereo recording long before their fellows.

EMI was perhaps the most timid in terms of entering the stereo market. Even though they had recorded Maria Callas' “Il Barbiere di Siviglia” in stereo in 1955, most of their product was resolutely monophonic and, with the exception of a few single-disc recordings, remained so until 1958. In 1956 they recorded two opera sets that were to become phonographic classics, “La Bohème” conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham and “Die Meistersinger” conducted by Rudolf Kempe. Both sold phenomenally well, yet both were put to pasture by many record-buyers with the advent of stereo.



The Beecham “Bohème” was an interesting case of an eccentric recording that influenced mainstream performance practice. Reversing his view of the score that he held in 1935, when he recorded Act IV of the opera with soprano Lisa Perli, Beecham’s 1956 reading of the score was ultra-gooshy-romantic in a way that Puccini would have absolutely hated. Known for sarcastically ordering conductors to “speed it up,” Puccini would have been appalled at Beecham’s slow, sugary reading that became even slower in places. Soprano Lucine Amara, who sang Musetta in that performance, had never sung the role on stage at the time and so was reading from the score. Decades later, she recalled how frustrated she was with Beecham’s quirky ritards in Musetta’s waltz scene, and how she quickly lost an argument with him about keeping to score tempo.

Oddly enough, critics of the time disliked the Beecham set. They complained not only about the slow tempi but also about the “emotionally neuter” performances of soprano Victoria de los Angeles as Mimi and tenor Jussi Björling as Rodolfo. But time and nostalgia have a way of adding luster to recordings once thought mediocre. By the time EMI deleted the set in 1963 it was already becoming a cult classic, and when they revived it on their budget-priced Seraphim label six years later, it became an instant classic: a low-priced “Bohème” with an all-star cast, perfect for a market that had been raised and weaned on the LP.

A similar fate was in store for another Beecham recording, this one his 1959 stereo recording of Handel’s “Messiah.” Eschewing any of the early-music revivalists’ rhetoric about smaller choirs and orchestras, Beecham was convinced that if Handel’s music were to be part of a living repertoire, it had to be given the big-sound treatment. Not only did he hire a huge chorus and orchestra, but he used a modern orchestration written by Sir Eugene Goossens that made Noah Greenberg’s scores sound like a sextet. He then hired a quartet of singers with huge operatic voices—soprano Jennifer Vyvyan, mezzo Monica Sinclair, tenor Jon Vickers and bass Giorgio Tozzi—to give it that full operatic treatment. Once heard, it was never forgotten, whether you wanted to or not. The sound, especially, of Vickers’ Heldentenor-sized voice roaring out “He shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel,” to the accompaniment of smashing, crashing cymbals, is an old-school approach that made many cringe, others rejoice. For the next seven years, thanks to the success of Beecham’s recordings, superannuated “Messiahs” cropped up all over the place. Most successful of them, after Beecham’s own, was the abridged recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy with the entire Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the equally Wagnerian-sized voice of soprano Eileen Farrell.

And it was not just Beecham whose conducting slowed down with age. Bruno Walter, Tullio Serafin, Pierre Monteux, Otto Klemperer and Ernest Ansermet all became not only slower but slacker, less detailed, less cohesive in overall musical shaping as they aged, and ironically they were among the most prestigious and highly-touted of conductors on record. Between all of them and Karajan, who often conducted slowly, record-buyers became used to slower performances. (Karl Böhm did *not* usually conduct slowly, especially not in Wagner, Strauss or Berg, but he *did* conduct his Mozart very slowly, and since DGG was pushing him the critics lauded him as “dean of Mozart conductors.”) As has been pointed out elsewhere, the critics were often in the employ of the record companies, and so they were paid rather well to “push the product.” The inevitable result was to reject the brisker, more score-accurate performances of Fritz Reiner and William Steinberg; of brisker conductors in the 1960s, only George Szell with the Cleveland Orchestra was highly praised by critics. Otherwise, the slowdown of tempo within the central repertoire became a central issue of the time.

Leonard Bernstein, praised by some and damned by many others, was a case unto himself. An extraordinarily talented and well-educated musician, Bernstein’s mind simply

worked too quickly and too intuitively for him to approach music objectively. Strictly as a technician, Bernstein was very inexact; every orchestra he ever conducted, from the La Scala Orchestra to the New York Philharmonic to the Vienna Philharmonic, had a ragged, unfocused sound in every section. As an interpreter, he was very phlegmatic: he could be exciting, boring, energized, flaccid, innovative or a distorter of the score. Tempos and tempo relationships meant nothing to him; certain sections of the music would be sped up, slowed down, or heavily italicized in such a way that it put dramatic accents on passages that the composer did not want accented. Oddly enough, his heavy editorializing worked extremely well in Bach, Mozart and Haydn, composers whose strict mathematical “balance” would not seem to respond well to such a treatment, while the central-repertoire romantics (Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky) were often heavily distorted.

Yet it was his work with the music of Mahler that was considered the most interesting and influential, even when wrong-headed. Being somewhat neurotic by nature himself, Bernstein responded to the neurotic quality of Mahler’s music yet, because of his own internal inconsistencies as an interpreter, his various recorded performances were inconsistent as well. Some of the New York Philharmonic Mahler recordings—the series that literally shook the world—are now judged to be technically messy and emotionally over-the-top, while some of his later cycle with the Vienna Philharmonic is considered to be more controlled, technically and interpretively, if sometimes musically inexact. As time went on, of course, other major conductors recorded not only individual Mahler symphonies but also complete cycles, so that by the late 20th century our Mahler listening has been literally “re-conditioned” by the phonograph. For Mahler is one of those conductors (Berlioz is another) whose music was almost never well-served by monophonic recordings. Stereo sound imaging was essential to exposing not only the richness of orchestral detail but also the visceral impact of the music itself, in which “layering” of sound was essential. Nowhere is this more easily shown than in Otto Klemperer’s two recordings of the composer’s Second Symphony. His “live” performance from the 1950s, issued by Vox, is incredibly fiery, inspired, and well-played, but it is in mono. His stereo recording from 1962—while also fiery in places and extremely well-played (and sung), lacks a certain amount of inspiration, especially in the first movement, but the stereo imaging gives the recording an emotional and visceral impact that is completely lacking in the monophonic performance. If you multiply this kind of experience by 1,000, you will see how stereo recordings re-made our way of listening, especially in the symphonic but also in the operatic repertoire. Expanded sound meant a more complete listening experience.

But, you will say, wasn’t this true of live performances given in the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s of Mahler’s music? Of course it was. But how many people actually attended such concerts? A few thousand at most. And who were they? Listeners who had a previous exposure to and like of Mahler’s music, and/or were fans of the conductor of the moment. It took a media salesman like Bernstein to take Mahler out of the realm of esoterica and move him into the mainstream. Educated listeners today may indeed be shocked, thrilled or appalled by Bernstein’s Mahler, but they can neither ignore it nor deny its historical impact. Without Bernstein, only a few thousand people today would even be *listening* to Mahler.

The coming of stereo in 1957 was much more of a success than the record companies had anticipated. They had had to prod and persuade people to forsake their 78-rpm players in order to upgrade to LPs and 45s, but once heard, stereo was coveted by people in a way that was hard to fathom. Surely no other recording advance up to that time, not even the switch from acoustic to electrical recording, was embraced as swiftly as stereo. But there were still problems to overcome, not least of which was how to make the sound “natural.” In their enthusiasm to persuade listeners that there *was* a difference between mono and stereo, the vari-

ous labels set up a soundstage that was very tightly divided between left and right-channel speakers. The end result was sound that was two-channel, to be sure, but not entirely natural; there was, as critics put it, a “hole in the middle of the sound” where one could hear left and right but nothing in between.

Again, it was London Records that first came up with a solution. In 1957, when everyone else was finally just getting into the act, London [Decca] was making recordings that filled in the sound between channels wonderfully well. Indeed, even their earliest stereo records, such as a complete “Turandot” with sopranos Inge Borkh and Renata Tebaldi and tenor Mario del Monaco, or the complete “Forza del Destino” with Tebaldi, del Monaco and bass Cesare Siepi, had no “hole in the middle” whereas the recordings of their competitors did. This was the era in which London promoted itself as “full frequency range recording,” or “ffrr,” even though its frequency range was no wider on the master tapes than anyone else’s. It just sounded better because of superior engineering.

Unfortunately, London began to defile their own sound in 1959 with the introduction of a new stereo quality in which not only singers but even orchestras were recessed and bathed in a very ambient acoustic. The resultant sound quality, highly offensive to critics and musicians, was inexplicably adored by the record-buying public. The critics called it “tunnel sound,” and railed against it constantly, but as the dollars and pounds and Deutschmarks kept pouring in, London-Decca really didn’t care. In a short-term agreement with RCA Victor, they even made records for the American label (though masters were owned by London) that were released on RCA’s “Soria Series,” a high-toned line of records aimed at the snob class. Though the resultant performances were often ruined by the sound quality – among them a Verdi “Requiem” conducted by Reiner, a complete “Aida” with Leontyne Price and Georg Solti, and especially a ghastly “Die Walküre” in which the excellence of the performance was heard as if from a bathroom down the hall – they sold like hotcakes. The success of this “tub of goo” sound inspired producer John Culshaw, who had recorded Wagner’s “Das Rheingold” in fairly natural sound in 1959, to record the rest of the composer’s “Ring Cycle” in the most artificial ambience possible, creating a blowsy, pumped-up “wall of sound” that was to strongly influence pop record production in the future.

Remaking the repertoire for stereo; New projects

In the feeding frenzy over stereo recordings, many artists who had already (so it seemed) immortalized their interpretations for the future felt the need – or were persuaded by their record labels for the need – to re-record their repertoire in stereo. Thus Munch re-recorded his “Roméo et Juliette” and “Symphonie Fantastique” in stereo, the first in an inferior performance, the latter in a tidier, more musically exact but no less exciting one. Reiner re-recorded his best-selling “Also Sprach Zarathustra,” but the 1961 remake lacked the bite and drive of the 1954 version. Even Callas and Stravinsky were persuaded to remake some of their repertoire for the new sound, despite the fact that the former was losing her voice and the latter was aging rapidly.



By 1959, there were four labels whose sound quality was deemed so “perfect” that it created an entirely new breed of listener, the “audiophile.” Audiophiles were, it seemed, not interested so much in the music as in how the music sounded. They sent exorbitant amounts of money on speakers, amps, pre-amps, tuners and tweeters, sound-channel equalizers and needle cartridges so expensive and sophisticated that they were out of the reach of most average working people. The three labels they preferred above all others were RCA’s new “Living Stereo” with its famous icon of the dog-and-phonograph against a darkly shaded cranberry background while the rest of the label was a bright orange-red; Mercury Classics, whose “Living Presence” gave a treble-heavy, somewhat shrill sound that was magically re-equalized when played on the bass-heavy playback equipment of the day; DGG, whose label had turned to a bright yellow with a tulip insignia

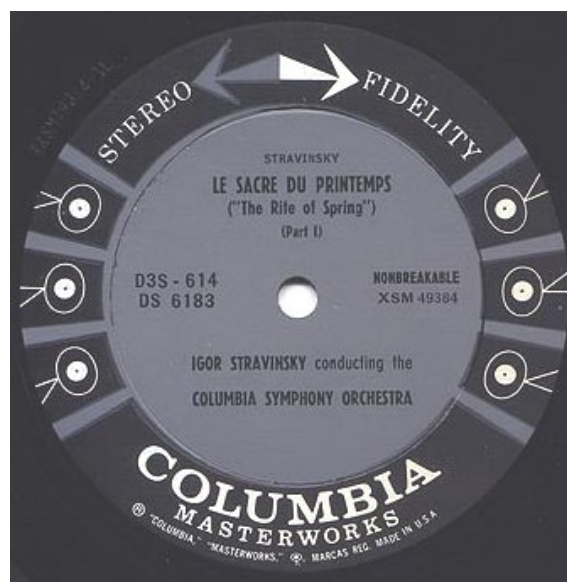


that would become yet another popular icon among classical collectors; and a small label from California, Everest Records, who had made a quantum leap. They did not record their stereo discs from audiotape, like everyone else, but directly from 35-millimeter film. At last, that magical, full-range “movie sound” that people had heard in theaters was accessible to them on their home players.

The ironic part of Everest’s success was that the process at that time was expensive, also that the label had difficulty procuring quality talent not already sewed up by the other major labels. They did manage to hire two quality conductors who the majors had cut loose, Eugene Goossens (whose



recording of “Petrouchka” was considered even finer than Stravinsky’s own) and Igor Markevitch (whose recording of the music of Lili Boulanger, Nadia’s sister who had died tragically at the age of 25), but otherwise struggled to fill the growing demand for their product. They thought they had another coup when they signed the eccentric but brilliant American conductor Jascha Horenstein to record Mahler’s First Symphony for their label, but at practically the last minute Horenstein became ill and couldn’t make the recording session. In a panic, the label’s producer called the aging but venerable British conductor Sir Adrian Boult and asked him to fill in. Boult did so, and produced a classic of the phonograph – so much so that he was quickly hired



away by rival EMI to record Holst's "The Planets" for them in stereo!

After the death of Reiner and firing of Munch from the Boston Symphony, however, RCA entered a period in which it had a hard time competing in the classical market. Victims of their own publicity, they had so built up "the Reiner Sound" and "the Munch Sound" that when they left the label, there were no conducting giants to take their place. Dmitri Mitropoulos' successor at the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, was a Columbia property, as were the highly popular Ormandy, the critically-acclaimed Robert Craft, and of course, Stravinsky himself. Their continuing stream of recordings into the 1960s, guided by the commercially savvy yet musically astute hand of Lieberman, led Columbia to the forefront of American labels. They even had the temerity to experiment with some very avant-garde music, recording not once but twice – in mono *and* stereo – the complete works of Webern under Craft's direction, a great deal of Ives conducted by Bernstein, Ginastera's Grand Guignol opera "Bomarzo" (a co-production with CBS Canada) and, in one of the boldest moves by any record company, the complete works of a long-dead composer who, like Berlioz, had been considered too crazy and too uncommercial to bother recording extensively. His name was Gustav Mahler.

In a landmark television program, part of his long-running "Young People's Concerts" on CBS, Bernstein dedicated an entire program to the enigmatic composer, not even universally liked in German countries, entitled "Who is Mahler?" Watching it today, we are aghast to realize that even so popular a work as the Fourth Symphony was virtually unknown in this country, but Bernstein made the music come alive for his viewers and listeners, and by year's end was recording both that work and another thorny piece – Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony – for Columbia. Much to everyone's surprise, the records sold like hotcakes.

It turned out that Shostakovich's symphonies were, by and large, not to everyone's liking, and not all the symphonies appealed to those who liked the Fifth. But in the case of Mahler, it was another story. Thanks primarily to Bernstein's promotion of him, his works graduated from the realm of esoteric curiosity to that of commercial mainstream. By 1966, no one had to explain who Mahler was; the market had grown exponentially to the point where even conductors who had never performed his music previously, such as Eugene Ormandy (who proved surprisingly good in this idiom) and Herbert von Karajan (who didn't) were recording them. Thirteen years after the "Who is Mahler?" program, not only Bernstein but also Georg Solti had produced, or were producing, entire Mahler symphony cycles. The boom was on.

Vocalese: An art dependent on records

In 1921, four singers from the Jubilee Gospel Singers who called themselves the Norfolk Jazz Quartette began recording a capella renditions of jazz and blues numbers. They wrote their own lyrics to them, but since this was still before the era of the jazz soloist, their recordings have only a marginal interest among collectors.

In 1929 Bee Palmer, a very pretty blond vaudeville singer, asked Jean Cocteau to write lyrics to the jazz solos played by saxist Frank Trumbauer and cornetist Bix Beiderbecke from their 1927 recording of "Singin' the Blues," then already an old tune written in the early 1920s by J. Russel Robinson of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. She recorded this number for Columbia, backed by a small band led by Trumbauer himself from the ranks of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, but her voice sounded horrendous on records and so it was not released until six decades later. But in 1934 another vaudeville singer, Marion Harris, who had come to prominence in the late 'Teens singing jazz-tinged popular songs, made her own record of

“Singin’ the Blues” in London. Harris composed her own music and words for the opening verse, then sang two choruses, one set to Trumbauer’s solo and the second to Bix’s. It was much more successful as an artistic achievement, and much more influential. When it was issued on British Decca, it became an underground favorite among jazz musicians.

Yet it was not until the middle 1940s that other singers, principally Eddie Jefferson and Dave Lambert, began composing lyrics for a whole set of jazz solos taken from favorite records. About this time, their efforts caught the ear of Ella Fitzgerald, who sometimes used the technique herself, off and on, throughout the rest of her career. The first number that Fitzgerald set to her own lyrics was “How High the Moon,” a song that had lyrics of its own. She made up her own words to match the rhythm of her scatted vocal.

In the 1950s, a number of singers began using the technique, among them a black singer named Clarence Beeks who called himself King Pleasure, a white British soprano named Annie Ross, and another black singer, Jon Hendricks. King Pleasure had a surprise hit record with “Moody’s Mood for Love,” based on James Moody’s solo in the popular standard, “I’m in the Mood for Love.” Yet it was Ross and Hendricks, who teamed up with Dave Lambert in 1957, who brought the technique to fruition.

In a series of albums for Roulette (“Sing a Song of Basie” and “Sing Along With Basie”), Pacific Jazz (“The Swingers”) and eventually Columbia, the trio of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross hit the American public smack between its collective ears.

Though the “vocalese” fad soon wore out its welcome with a public more attuned to either the smooth stylings of Andy Williams, Rosemary Clooney and Frank Sinatra or the burgeoning rock music industry, it had engrained itself into the jazz consciousness. Much later, in the 1980s, the vocal group Manhattan Transfer revived the practice and briefly became pop idols themselves.

Vocalese is entirely dependent on the medium of recording for its existence. Without recording, it would be virtually impossible for anyone to remember a jazz solo in all its varied twists and turns long enough to set lyrics to it; nor would an audience know what on earth they were singing unless they were familiar with, or could at least hear, the original records from which the solos came. Ironically, of all the jazz records Manhattan Transfer made of vocalese versions of tunes, only two of them were well-known by the mass public, and they were Glenn Miller records, “On a Little Street in Singapore” and “Tuxedo Junction.” Some of them, such as “Airegin,” was actually a remake of one of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross’s records, so in effect there was a double-record influence on that one disc.



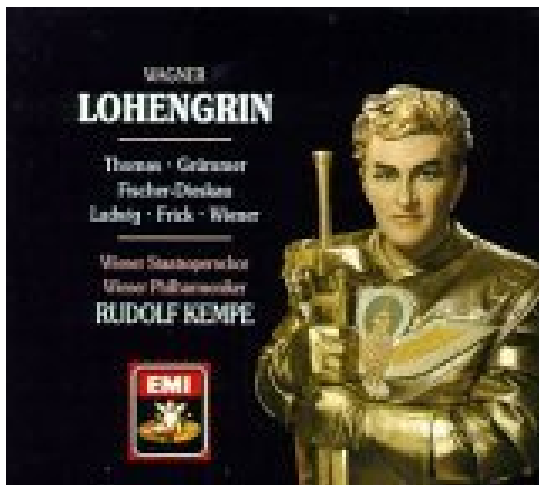
Legge at work: Klemperer and “Classic” opera sets

Though EMI was late getting into the stereo realm, at least later than London-Decca or RCA, they more than made up for it with aggressive marketing techniques that even put RCA’s Toscanini push to shame. First, Legge started re-recording works that had already been marketed strongly in the high-fidelity era. Then, wanting to trump Decca’s aces of the

complete Mozart-Da Ponte operas in stereo—all with the highly-touted bass Cesare Siepi—he started creating the first of what would come to be known as “all-star” casts. Among the first of these projects was the 1959 “Don Giovanni” with Joan Sutherland (a year before Decca-London recorded her in “Lucia di Lammermoor”), Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Graziella Sciutti, Luigi Alva, Eberhard Wächter, Giuseppe Taddei and conductor Carlo Maria Giulini. Despite technical problems—some scenes are replete with splices, Wächter’s voice became hard and ugly at full volume, and Sciutti’s very lightweight voice had to be pumped up by the microphone in order to have her “balance” properly—EMI’s aggressive promotion managed to get this set promoted as the “classic” performance of “Don Giovanni,” at a time when the Siepi-Josef Krips version from 1956 was still considered the standard by many musicians. But Siepi’s female partners on his set—Suzanne Danco, Lisa Della Casa and Hilde Güden—simply did not have the star power of Sutherland or Schwarzkopf, and Krips was an older German conductor, not a young Italian “glamour boy” like Giulini.

On the heels of “Don Giovanni,” Legge signed veteran conductor Otto Klemperer, once a firebrand identified with the avant-garde repertoire of Weill and Berg in the 1920s, but now older, slower and physically handicapped, to record Beethoven’s “Fidelio.” Klemperer had recently performed the opera at Covent Garden with the radiant Sena Jurinac as Leonore, but Legge knew that Jurinac, like Danco and Della Casa, was a “musician’s singer” and not as likely to sell records. So he put star mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig in the role of Leonore. The resultant recording featured a well-balanced cast of older (bass Gottlob Frick) and rising (Ludwig and tenor Jon Vickers) stars. Listening to it today, it scarcely compares with the great recorded performances of Flagstad-Walter or Dernes-Vickers-Karajan, yet it, too, is considered a “classic” recording because EMI’s publicity says so.

The success of this “Fidelio” prompted Legge to sign Klemperer to a long-term contract. By means of savvy promotion, plus Klemperer’s demeanor which was far more compliant than the volatile Furtwängler’s, he managed to make his stodgy, carved-in-stone recordings of Beethoven symphonies and Mozart operas “modern classics.” Along the way, Klemperer did manage to record some genuine masterpieces, particularly the music of his (very) old friend Gustav Mahler such as “Das Lied von der Erde” and the Second and Fourth Symphonies. By and large, Klemperer’s diminished abilities were not what EMI claimed them to be, yet the company still sold many copies based on promotion alone.



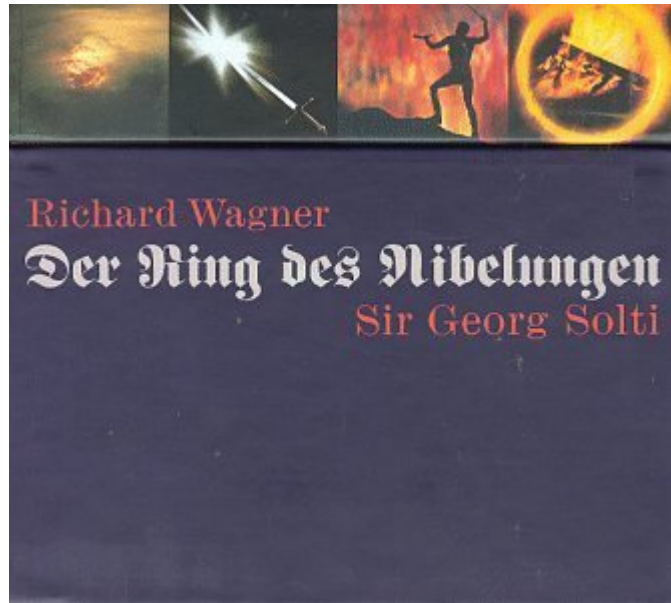
Another “classic” opera set marketed by EMI in those years was a surprisingly good “Lohengrin” starring American tenor Jess Thomas, German soprano Elisabeth Grümmer and the star of EMI’s 1956 “Meistersinger,” conductor Rudolf Kempe. For reasons that are not entirely clear, but probably related to his temperament and how well he got along with Legge, Kempe was not selected as EMI’s golden boy the way Klemperer was, yet to musicians it was clear that he combined, like Karajan, the very best traits of Furtwängler (orchestral weightiness when called for) and Toscanini (clear orchestral textures and uniform tempi) in his performances. Yet it would not

be until Legge left EMI in the 1970s that Kempe finally got the push he deserved, with a complete set of the Beethoven symphonies and another of the orchestral works of Richard Strauss. Still, the Kempe “Lohengrin” created the tradition of using a lighter, more silvery

voice as Elsa than had previously been house standard. Where previous Elsas included such meaty voices as Flagstad, Frida Leider and Helen Traubel, it was now possible, even preferred, to use sopranos of the Grümmer type.

By this time, however (1961), the other labels were catching on to EMI's methods and marketing, and they quickly began to follow suit. Within a few years, there were not a few complete opera sets on the market with singers who not only had never sung those particular roles on stage, but probably wouldn't appear together outside a recording studio because their voices simply didn't match in size. So there was "La Traviata" with soprano Anna Moffo pumped up, and tenor Richard Tucker and baritone Robert Merrill singing in the men's room down the hall; "Aïda" with a cast and conductor who never once performed the opera in person, soprano Leontyne Price, mezzo Rita Gorr, tenor Jon Vickers, baritone Merrill and conductor Georg Solti; Leontyne Price in "Carmen," a role she never performed onstage, with an even more bizarre vocal partner in tenor Franco Corelli whose sung French was atrocious; and soprano Joan Sutherland, singing French operas and bel canto works with an ever-revolving door of tenors and mezzos, trying to find ones who would be "stars" with her. They succeeded with mezzo Marilyn Horne and tenor Luciano Pavarotti, both of whom became superstars, and baritone Gabriel Bacquier, who based his style on the elegant bel canto baritones of the past, became a big name despite a voice that was not very well-centered because of his extraordinary acting skills; but they never quite succeeded in making tenors Alain Vanzo or Anastasios Vreinos major stars, and mezzo Huguette Tourangeau, a remarkably skilled singer, only achieved a modicum of success.

Yet it was London-Decca that scored the greatest *coup* of the stereo era: the first complete integral recording of Wagner's massive "Ring des Nibelungen," conducted by Solti and featuring an all-star cast of Birgit Nilsson, Wolfgang Windgassen, Christa Ludwig, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Gottlob Frick. The first installment was made in 1958, "Das Rheingold," in which the great George London was Wotan and the venerable but still remarkable Flagstad sang Fricka, but London's subsequent illness and diminished powers caused Decca to replace him with Hans Hotter, wobbly and infirm of voice yet universally praised for his interpretations. Despite an outlay of hundreds of thousands of dollars over a seven-year period, the Solti "Ring," retailing at about \$150, sold like hotcakes in an era when the Beatles and Rolling Stones were still topping the charts. It was, unquestionably, the last great gasp for classical music at a time when the two types of music were passing each other like ships in the night—a true "Götterdämmerung" of art, so to speak.



The Vox Revolution

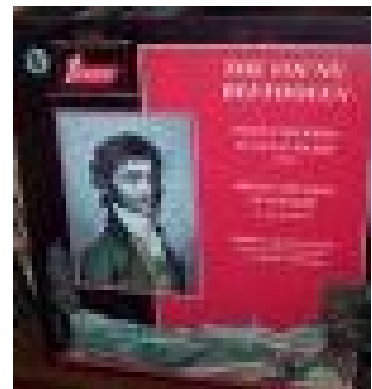
In the late 1950s Vox, the French label which had started in the early 1930s, began issuing inexpensive classical LPs. Some of the Vox artists were well-known European perform-



ers, others were up-and-coming artists, but in general the performance level was very good. And, in addition to selling their records in the usual outlets, record stores, Vox managed to get their product into campus bookstores. This gave the burgeoning college student market an opportunity to sample the great classics at an inexpensive price.

Much to everyone's surprise, the Vox series took off like wildfire. In 1961, Vox introduced its alternate label, Turnabout, which was devoted more to reissues of older recordings than to new ones. These, too, sold well. By 1964, every major label was scrambling to catch up. RCA introduced their "Victrola" series of classical LPs; Columbia introduced "Odyssey"; British Decca (London) introduced their "Stereo Treasury" series; EMI introduced "Seraphim"; Vanguard started an "Everyman Classics" series; and Elektra, a label that had started in 1950, introduced their "Nonesuch" label. All did well and quickly took over a major segment of the classical market, even though most of the Victrola releases were historical reissues. The most successful of these was an extensive reissue of Toscanini's recordings. RCA distorted the sound of the original records to a shocking degree, thinning out the already shallow sound of the original Red Seal LPs and, in 1966, reprocessing the discs for a new innovation, electronically-created binaural sound. This "electronically enhanced stereo" was a gross distortion of the original records, yet it, too, took off financially.

Yet it was Vox and, later, Nonesuch that made the greatest headway in the college market. Their discs continued to sell at campus bookstores into the early 1970s, and probably did as much or more to initiate educated listeners to the glories of this ancient but venerable repertoire. Among the many series that Vox introduced were the Beethoven piano sonatas as played by the up-and-coming pianist Alfred Brendel and a boxed set of the complete organ works of J.S. Bach. As time went on, Nonesuch also made headway into the campus market, though in the record stores London Stereo Treasury, Victrola and Seraphim did most of the business.



Stereo Treasury had the distinct advantage of presenting artists such as Herbert von Karajan and Ernest Ansermet in up-to-date sound, which appealed greatly to the new breed of "stereophiles." Seraphim, on the other hand, had an even deeper historical catalog to draw on, issuing not only early stereo recordings by Sir Thomas Beecham, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Guido Cantelli but also such phonographic classics as Nadia Boulanger's 1937 Monteverdi album, the songs of Carl Nielsen and Schubert's "Die Schöne Müllerin" as sung by Aksel Schiøtz, the early abridged "Der Rosenkavalier" with Lotte Lehmann and Richard Mayr, German tenor favorites Tauber and Joseph Schmidt, Toscanini's BBC Sym-

phony recordings, and even the Beecham "La Bohème." By 1971, the budget labels had taken over such a large piece of the classical record market that their sales, like the sales of pop and rock records, were used to finance more expensive contemporary projects.

Two new tenors: Gedda and Wunderlich

In 1952, knowing that in about another year EMI would lose its American marketing through its split with RCA, Walter Legge cast about for a phonogenic Swedish tenor who could replace the popular Jussi Björling on their label. He discovered the Swedish-Russian



tenor Nicolai Gedda singing in operetta and Mozart opera performances, and decided to make him a major star. Before his voice was even really settled, Gedda sang the lead in two major complete opera recordings, “Boris Godunov” and “Faust,” and made an operatic recital for the label. Gedda was not, like Björling, a particular exponent of popular Italian operas; he did not and never would sing “Il Trovatore,” “Aïda,” “Manon Lescaut,” “Cavalleria Rusticana” or “Pagliacci.” But Legge already had Giuseppe di Stefano to sing those kind of parts, and Gedda did sing other Björling roles such as Faust, Rodolfo in “La Bohème,” the Duke of Mantua in “Rigoletto” and Don José in “Carmen.” More interestingly, Gedda was becoming a master of French and Russian op-

era, something no one else in his time was specializing in. He sang Don José much better than Björling ever did, and in addition could sing in such operas as Glinka’s “Life for the Czar,” Peter Cornelius’ “Barber of Baghdad,” Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin,” Offenbach’s “Tales of Hoffmann,” Bizet’s “Pêcheurs des Perles,” Massenet’s “Werther” and, in addition, Mozart operas and Viennese operetta. Along with Legge’s wife, soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Gedda made an extensive series of operetta recordings for EMI in the mid-to-late 1950s. He was also rapidly showing himself to be a master of both German lieder and Russian songs.

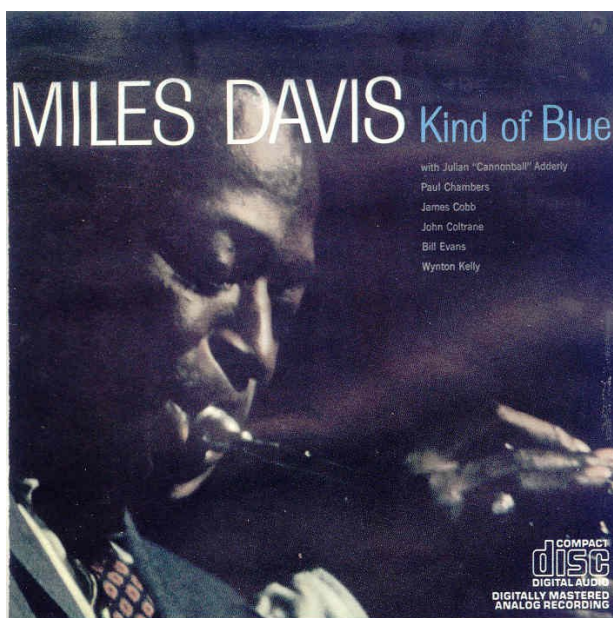
What was particularly interesting about Gedda was that he was one of the first major name artists who based several of his interpretations on tenors of the past. He not only heard some of the great tenors of the past in movies or in person, but also on recordings. Thus he was able to base his interpretations of “Magische note” from Goldmark’s “Queen of Sheba,” Schumann’s “Nacht und Träume,” the aria “Viens, gentile dame” from Boieldieu’s “La Dame Blanche” and the arias from “Les Huguenots” on Leo Slezak; his phrasing in operetta, “Tales of Hoffmann” and Strauss’ “Heimliche aufforderung” on Richard Tauber; and his Rodolfo in “Bohème” on one of his idols, Beniamino Gigli—though he readily admitted that, in the case of Gigli, he only tried to emulate his wide-open voice production with its bright, gleaming sound, not his quirky phrasing. Of course, Gedda could only get snippets of operas from the old records (except for Gigli’s “Bohème” which was recorded complete), so it could not be said that he slavishly copied these tenors, but it is interesting that his ears were open to the best of the past and that he was more than willing to take from it to build his art.

Beginning in the late 1950s, a different kind of German tenor emerged. This was Fritz Wunderlich, whose gleaming, almost Italianate-sounding voice stood in marked contrast to the darker, more nasal voices of Tauber, Wittrisch and Völker. Possibly because he was more modern, more scrupulously musical, he eschewed copying these older models. His performances, not only of Mozart but also of Smetana, Puccini, Handel and Richard Strauss owed

absolutely nothing to the past. He believed in creating his own way of doing things based on his understanding of the score and what he found there. Many of the ways he sang things now sound a bit odd, old-fashioned or controversial to us today, but in a way he did create a new model for German tenors of the succeeding generation. His untimely death at age 36 robbed the world of a remarkable and intelligent artist, one who may have been able to revamp and re-energize a staid repertoire. As in the case of Jussi Björling, his early death made him a posthumous legend, in fact an even better seller than he had been during his lifetime. Yet there were limitations. Wunderlich sang most of the Italian arias he recorded in German; in fact, he was part of the very last generation to do so, a generation that also included the soprano Anneliese Rothenberger and the mezzo Trudeliese Schmidt, neither of whom were very popular outside of Germany and Austria either. Yet ironically, what dated his records more so than Gedda's was the fact that he was *not* a particularly romantic interpreter. Many listeners, in fact, called Wunderlich the tenor "with the voice of gold and the heart of steel." For all his artistic energy and commitment, and despite a wonderful and sincere eulogy from fellow-artist Fischer-Dieskau, Wunderlich's singing simply failed to touch the heart as much as Gedda's. It would be a generation before his full-blooded Mozart singing would become performance standard, whereas Gedda's recordings found not only contemporary success but longer-lasting critical acclaim.



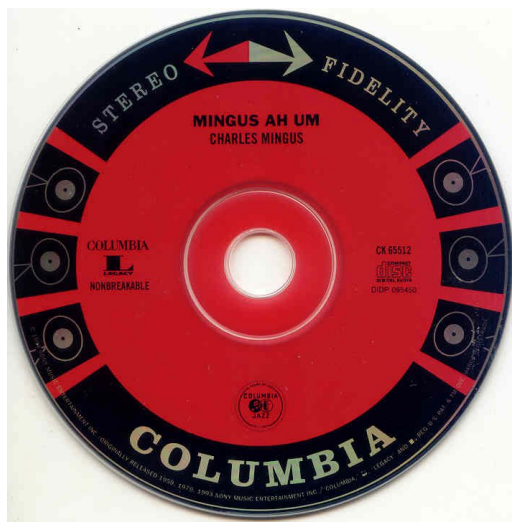
A Renaissance of jazz



Throughout the 1950s and '60s, jazz experienced a renaissance of quality and popularity. Thanks to the LP record, jazz disc jockeys like Studs Terkel, Oscar Treadwell and Ralph Berton, and a growing coterie of fans from the growing culture of college students, jazz grew in unprecedented ways. The Newport Jazz Festival, the brainchild of promoter George Wein, started in the mid-1950s. Over the next fifteen years Newport revived the careers of Phil Napoleon, Duke Ellington and Pee Wee Russell, made stars of Errol Garner and Thelonious Monk, and helped boost the careers of Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis and many others.

Yet it was primarily the LP that brought jazz out of the nightclubs and helped

make it an art form. Almost every jazz style was recorded prolifically in those years, especially by Columbia Records. Even as rock music was taking over the pop market, Columbia discreetly avoided it, largely because its music director, Mitch Miller, detested it. Baritone

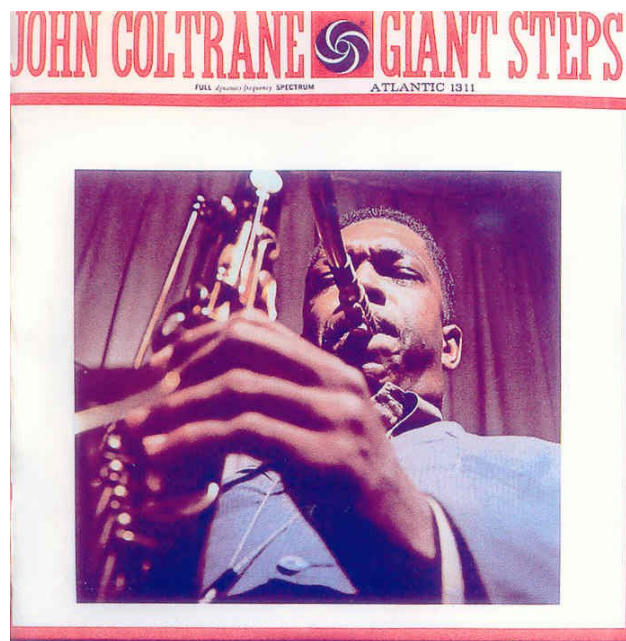


saxist Teo Macero was hired as the label's jazz A&R man, and between 1955 and 1961 he managed to hire some of the greatest names in jazz to short and long-term contracts. Those who benefited most from the association were Davis, Brubeck, Ellington, Garner, Monk and an irascible but supremely talented bassist-composer, Charles Mingus. The recordings they made for the label are all considered classics today, especially Davis' "Kind of Blue" and Mingus' "Mingus Ah Um." Macero and Columbia indeed proved that jazz could be both artistic and good business.

RCA Victor, more conservative by nature, was loath to invest big money into jazz. They had signed rocker Elvis Presley away from Sam Phillips'

Sun label in 1956, and had parlayed him into a multi-million-dollar industry. Joining him on the label were such big-name but mainstream country artists as Eddy Arnold, Jim Reeves and Hank Snow. They made so much money for RCA that they saw little reason to invest heavily in jazz, especially since they were already investing a large amount of money in classical. Yet they did produce a few great jazz albums by trumpeter Henry "Red" Allen, hard bop bandleader Art Blakey, composer-pianist George Russell, tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins and even Mingus ("Tijuana Moods").

Yet it was Atlantic, a label that had built its audience and reputation on rhythm and blues, that showed the most interest in jazz. Neshuhi Ertegun, an Egyptian-born jazz lover, was the label's chief producer at the time, and he invested heavily in the artists he believed in. Even before Mingus was signed by Columbia and RCA, he was producing groundbreaking albums by him, and continued to do so through 1961. He also took a chance on two of the most avant-garde musicians of the era, alto saxist Ornette Coleman and tenor saxophonist John Coltrane. Though their records were largely ignored by the general public—the lone exception was Coltrane's recording of "My Favorite Things" which became a surprise hit—Ertegun pushed them heavily until pressure from Atlantic management forced him to curtail his activity in 1961.



By this time, yet another independent label, Impulse!, was started by jazz impresario Creed Taylor as an offshoot of ABC-Paramount records. ABC was making a fortune from the

R&B records of Ray Charles, and so gave Taylor the green light to produce jazz to his heart's content. He quickly signed Coltrane, Mingus and Pee Wee Russell, all of whom had been considered non-commercial by other labels, added pianist Earl Hines, alto saxist Johnny Hodges and several others, and quickly built up one of the greatest jazz labels in history. Never before were musicians allowed as much freedom as they were on Impulse!, and they responded with some of the greatest work ever laid down on tape.

Yet there were repercussions to this renaissance. One was that, like the jazz audiences of the 1930s and '40s, listeners grew so accustomed to improvisations on records that they grew disenchanted when the musicians played different ones in person. Another was that the production qualities of recorded performances became as much a part of the music as the music itself. This was especially true of Mingus' extended suite, "The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady," which was essentially a studio-created work using tape loops, inserted snippets and pre-recorded orchestral tracks over which a soloist (alto saxist Charlie Mariano) improvised. Of course, these techniques were hardly confined to Impulse! alone. In 1963, tenor saxophonist Stan Getz improvised over pre-recorded orchestral music written by arranger Eddie Sauter. The resultant album, "Focus," won a Grammy award for best jazz record of the year. The success of "Focus" led his label, Verve, to allow him to make a string of records of the music of Brazilian guitarist Antonio Carlos Jobim. This style of music, with its gentle Brazilian beat, became



quickly known as "bossa nova" and created a Latin music craze equal to that of the mambo in the 1950s. An edited-down version of one of Getz' records, "The Girl From Ipanema" with a vocal by Jobim's wife, Astrid Gilberto, became a number one hit, the last time a true jazz record was to hold that distinction.

Two jazz musicians whose work was extremely influential in the classical community were George Russell and Bill Evans. Russell is practically unique among jazz musicians; though he played drums professionally in the 1940s, and later occasionally played drums and piano on his records, he was primarily a musical theorist, composer and orchestrator. During the 1950s he first



theory to any tune in any key or rhythm. Among his proponents were Coltrane, Miles Davis, Art Farmer, Jimmy Cleveland, Hal McCusick, and Bill Evans himself.

Evans, one of the most deceptively accomplished pianists of any era, always managed to sound relaxed and mellow even at the most extreme jazz tempo. He also incorporated Russell's theory of tonal organization and his own studies of harmonic progression into his playing in such a way that it is no exaggeration to say that musicians, even more so than his legion of casual jazz listeners, were Evans' biggest and most enthusiastic fans. Indeed, I cannot think of any classical pianist (just to name the occupants of one instrument group) who came up from 1960 onward who playing has *not* been influenced by Bill Evans. He is the *sine qua non* of his instrument, widely considered by musicians (if not necessarily by the record-buying public) as the greatest successor to Art Tatum. Yet whereas Tatum's artistry was exuberant and extroverted, Evans was the ultimate introvert. He eventually destroyed himself from heroin addiction and died in 1981.



But by 1966, the new empire of great jazz music began to crumble. The sudden deaths of Coltrane and his greatest disciple, alto saxist Eric Dolphy, the temporary retirements from jazz of Mingus, Evans and George Russell, and changing popular tastes led to a complete metamorphosis of the music. Declining record sales and the growing market for rock music pushed real jazz into the background. Thelonious Monk, urged to record an album of Beatles tunes, left Columbia in a huff; a year later, Miles Davis was pressed to make a rock-styled album. He responded with "Bitches' Brew," a weird concoction of rock rhythms and textures with jazz improvisation. Surprisingly, it became a best seller, creating a market for the new music which was later named "fusion."

But true jazz, and especially the more creative artists, were pushed into a backwater. Mingus experienced a rebirth of sorts when Columbia re-signed him in 1971. The resultant album, "Let My Children Hear Music," was one of the most brilliant of his career. It was nominated for a Grammy, but ironically the only Grammy it won was for the liner note—written by Mingus himself—in which he railed against the idiotic simplicity of rock music. Further disagreements with the label led him to jump, in 1973, back to Atlantic, where Nesuhi Ertegun was waiting with open arms. Another string of masterful records were made, but there was, eventually, a trade-off: Mingus had to record with rock guitarists. He yelled and complained, but made the record. It was one of his weakest but, because it had a rock beat and whiny, flabby-sounding rock guitars, it made a fortune. Meanwhile, one of the most marginal and experimental of all jazz groups, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, was forced to sign with ECM, a German label that prided itself on producing music outside the mainstream.

Jazz was still art, at least for those who were left to appreciate it. But it was no longer commercial in any way, shape or form. Fusion eventually gave way to "New Age" jazz, which many have decried as elevator music, though at least one of its talents—guitarist Lee Ritenour—has garnered international praise for the brilliance of his improvisations against the mushy background of synthesized sounds.

A new label, new sounds, and a new technology

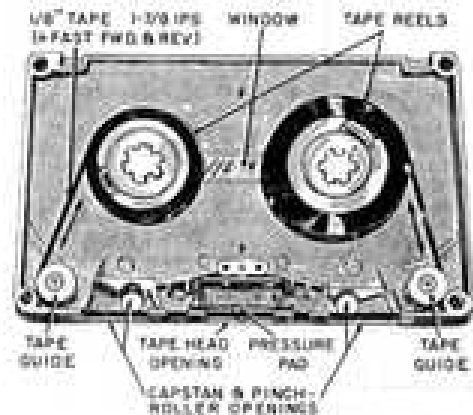
The early 1960s were watershed years for recordings, though it took a while for consumers to realize it. The first of the innovations to emerge, and the first to make an impact, was Decca-London records' new "Phase 4" label in 1961. Promising the break "the sonic barrier," Phase 4 stereo was the first to artificially move instruments further or closer to the microphone, away from the way they sounded in live performances of classical music.

According to early Decca promotion, "phase one" stereo was its initial concept; phase two was using stereo as a gimmick to emphasize the way sound could move from one channel to the other, i.e., the "ping pong ball" effect. Phase three was when engineers learned how to electronically "move" sounds so that individual instruments, voices and/or effects could be moved back or forth across what came to be known as "the sound stage." As Decca put it in early promo material, Phase 4 represented "New Scoring Concepts Incorporating True Musical Use of Separation and Movement. In this phase, arrangers and orchestrators re-score the music to place the instruments where they are musically most desired at any particular moment and make use of direction and movement to punctuate the musicality of sounds. The effect is more sound—more interest—more entertainment—more participation—more listening pleasure: PHASE 4 STEREO is not background music." Phase 4 albums quickly became known for their characteristic sound: warm, rich, clean, precisely performed, arranged and recorded. Sometimes the material was corny or not engaging, but you could always count on that sound. Not surprisingly, the invention of Phase 4 led to the resuscitation of Leopold Stokowski's career. Always an innovator in sound reproduction, as opposed to music per se, Stokowski's superannuated reorchestrations of the classics (thirty extra strings for Sibelius' "The Tempest," seven horns sitting down front for the last movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, etc.), were a perfect match for Phase 4. Today, once again, his recordings are ignored as inflated distortions of the music, but in the Phase 4 days they sold extremely well.

The new technology that was introduced in 1963, but which took five years to become musically acceptable, was the cassette tape. Introduced by Philips, the cassette was a tiny, narrow, thin reel-to-reel tape enclosed in a plastic shell that ran at 1 7/8 inches per second, as compared with the 15 to 30 ips of professional reel-to-reel recorders and the 7 1/2 ips of home models. It was sold the next year in the U.S. with the Norelco Carry-Corder dictation machine, but the demand for blank tape used for personal music recording was unanticipated by Philips. The concept helped engineers and collectors avoid the messiness of threading, storing and splicing the large, cumbersome reel-to-reel tapes that had been an industry standard since 1946, but the sound recorded on them had a lot of background hiss. This was remedied in 1968 when the Dolby system of noise reduction was invented.



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Actually the Dolby system of noise reduction had been introduced for professional use a year earlier, in 1967. Founder and researcher Ray Dolby hit upon a professional system that used four separate bands of companding, yielding about 14 dB of noise reduction, but it was not until 1968 that he introduced a consumer version, called Dolby B. Dolby B only yielded about 10 dB of noise reduction, but it was enough to make the cassette somewhat analogous to the reel-to-reel tape in sound.

As far as consumers of popular music were concerned, however, neither the cassette nor Dolby's noise reduction made much of an impact. That was because two years earlier, in 1966, the eight-track tape cartridge was born. Four and eight-track tapes coexisted on the market for some years, but the eight-track—introduced by Ampex—scored a hit with consumers because it was a continuous-loop tape contained within a larger, more shock-resistant shell than the cassette. As late as 1972, commercial 8-track tapes were enormously popular while cassettes were still used by home recordists rather than the big record companies, but eventually the cassette overwhelmed the 8-track. That was because improvements in design helped the cassette jam less often than it had in the past; and, in 1980, Dolby C was introduced which was equivalent to a pair of Dolby B circuits in series. Not coincidentally, Dolby C was advertised as yielding 20 dB of noise reduction, a marked improvement not only over Dolby B but its professional predecessor, Dolby A. Whatever its true frequency yield, it was obviously superior both to earlier cassettes and the 8-track. Within two years, commercial production of 8-track tapes dwindled significantly.

Classical illusions: Perfect performances and "classic" recordings

All of the various improvements in the recording, rearranging and splicing of recorded sound were not lost on the record industry. As early as 1957, classical labels were touting their product as "classic" performances, i.e., performances that were judged to be the finest ever given of a specific work. Nowhere was this marketing ploy used more often, or more successfully, than in the offices of EMI and Decca-London. Throughout the 1960s, these two labels were touting virtually all of their classical product as "definitive" performances, though musicians themselves quibbled. In addition, musicians disagreed over the merits of studio-created "performances" which were not performances at all, but ten-minute to half-hour recording segments spliced together, then further doctored with inserts of a few bars or, sometimes, just a soprano's high notes. Such studio chicanery helped promote soprano Joan Sutherland, who often went flat in performance, as the "perfect" coloratura; by 1967, Decca-London was marketing her under the moniker "La Stupenda." Those who heard her in performance were less than convinced. And, about that same year, Westminster Records, the classical wing of ABC-Paramount, signed a little-known soprano then singing at the New York City Opera, Beverly Sills, pumped her voice up via favorable microphone placement and studio boosting, and made her a superstar, the only real rival Sutherland had in the marketplace. Musicians who had heard both sopranos admitted that Sills was consistently on pitch and had the finer (if more machine-like) technique, Sutherland the larger and fuller voice, but neither were honestly represented on their recordings.

Yet all of this seemed like child's play compared to Decca-London's greatest studio achievement, the first commercially-issued recording of Richard Wagner's complete *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Conducted (in bits and pieces, of course) by Georg Solti and featuring an all-star cast, producer John Culshaw pulled out all the stops in creating a wholly artificial sound stage using Wagner's music as the backdrop. I say "using Wagner's music as the backdrop" because there were long stretches during which Solti's conducting produced no forward flow,

yet the wall of sound he created with the Vienna Philharmonic was wholly analogous with the one created in pop music by producer Phil Spector, and the voices singing the music were often subjected to not only a “flattening out” of volume, so that they all sounded equally huge of voice, but in which the production of sheer *sound* seemed much more important than a performance of the music. Of course, there were, and still are, many listeners who disagree with me, but none of them are musicians. For musicians, the finest *Ring* recordings are the “live” sets conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler (1953), Clemens Krauss (1953) and Karl Böhm (1967). The latter, in particular, has especially good and very natural sound, being recorded in performances at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, and many of the singers on this *Ring* were also participants in the Solti studio recording. But marketing is marketing, and until the mid-1970s few if any listeners questioned the musical quality of the Solti *Ring*.

On the other hand, the series of Benjamin Britten’s complete works, conducted by Britten himself, were considered a genuine treasure. Perhaps part of their success comes from the fact that, except for one work—the “War Requiem,” in which an offstage chorus is purposely recorded in muffled sound at the composer’s request—Britten insisted on a natural sound stage. Yet the real reason they work so well is that, in his own way, Britten was as great a conductor as Toscanini: fanatically attentive to orchestral detail, to tempos that moved, to creating as much as possible a “live” sound in the studio. In the decades since his death in 1976, many other conductors have presented their interpretations of Britten’s work, but only a very few have achieved what Britten did under more primitive circumstances (relatively speaking, of course) in the 1960s.

Leonard Bernstein’s “Young People’s Concerts”

Leonard Bernstein—the neurotic, outré, bisexual, over-demonstrative conductor of the New York Philharmonic—was always viewed as a flawed musical genius. Some critics loved his over-passionate, musically distorted performances, while others hated them, but one thing they all agreed on was that he was one of the best teachers of music in America, if not the world. Beginning around 1958, CBS television aired periodic, irregularly-scheduled “Young People’s Concerts” in which Bernstein would explain musical form, different types of harmony, or a particular composer; and these televised concerts were not aired on PBS, but on CBS’ flagship stations on Sunday afternoons.

In those days, arts programs of that sort were rarely tracked. It was especially difficult to track Sunday afternoon shows because, on average, so few viewers were watching television anyway. Yet the few times the show was tracked, they noticed a discernible spike in viewership for Bernstein’s performance-lectures. Pianist Oscar Levant, a famed cynic, sounded the lone dissenting voice when he complained that “Bernstein is teaching musical secrets that have only been known for hundreds of years.” The majority of viewers, lay and professional, were fascinated by his casual teaching style and admitted learning quite a bit from him.

Bernstein somehow, magically, managed to hold the attention of twelve-to-sixteen-year-old minds, the very ones now considered “unreachable” because of “intense peer pressure.” He managed to relate popular music, like The Association’s “Along Comes Mary,” the modes of ancient Greece; to show how difficult it really was to improvise jazz in spite of its aural relationship to pop music; and to introduce his young listeners to such then-little-known composers as Berlioz and Mahler, all in a way they could relate to. When Bernstein left the Philharmonic in 1972, and was replaced by the much younger Michael Tilson Thomas, CBS continued the “Young People’s Concerts” for a while under the new music director, but Til-

son Thomas could never strike the right chord (pun intended) with his audiences. Later packaged and sold as a series of VHS tapes, Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts" still hold up remarkably well. They are a testimony to his deep knowledge of, and passion for, music.

Folk music goes mainstream

At the end of 1956, Pete Seeger left his old group, The Weavers, to embark on a solo career. His replacement was a young, virtuoso banjo and 12-string guitar player named Erik Darling whose roots had not been in the records of Uncle Dave Macon or Woody Guthrie but in the playing of such jazz greats as Django Reinhardt and Oscar Moore. The result was that he literally propelled The Weavers to some of their greatest performances of all time. Singer Ronny Gilbert, a charter member of the quartet, later said that her happiest years in the group were the ones with Darling: "I was very unhappy when he left the group. Very."

In the meantime, there were other new folk groups on the scene that could "swing" like the new Weavers, particularly The Limelites out of Canada and The Chad Mitchell Trio. Both had moderate success, as did the new Weavers, but the group that literally exploded folk music into mainstream pop was The Kingston Trio. Accomplished, enthusiastic, handsome in a boy-next-door kind of way, The Kingston Trio—with generous financial promotion from their label, Capitol Records—sold millions of copies of songs like "Tom Dooley," "Ain't It Hard," "M.T.A.," "Desert Pete" and "The Ballad of the Thresher." As one can tell from the titles, one of the reasons for their success was that they combined not only authentic old folk tunes with Woody Guthrie songs, as the Weavers did, but also more contemporary themes such as subways and nuclear submarines. This formula, virtually patented by the group, was one that the Limelites and Chad Mitchell Trio emulated. The Weavers, on the other hand, had their own carefully-chosen songs of political protest, like "Wasn't That a Time" and "The Hammer Song" (which became a multi-million record seller years later when sung by Peter, Paul and Mary), these songs were not focused on contemporary themes; they were songs of general protest against an unfair social, political and economic system.

And this music was strongly popular with classical-music listeners, so much so that Robert Sherman, a classical DJ for New York's WQXR, started a weekly radio program called "Woody's Children" that ran for years, and many American composers filled their record shelves with LPs by the Weavers, Limelites, Kingston Trio and others.

Yet the greatest impact of the folk idiom on popular consciousness was none of these groups, but the work of individual singers. Odetta, one of the very few African-Americans who sang folk music, combined such general political folk songs as The Weavers' "Hammer Song" with older folk tunes proselytizing social unity and Gospel-influenced songs, such as "No Grave Can Hold My Body Down," originally captured on field records by the Lomaxes. She was signed and promoted by Vanguard, as were such white, affluent singers as Joan Baez, Mimi Fariña and the classically-trained Judy Collins. Unlike jazz, which "went to college," in this instance college students and their professors went to the coffeehouses to hear these folk singers, thus creating one more remove from the original folk sources. Not too much later, lounge singers like Trini Lopez were singing "If I Had a Hammer." But the real hand grenade in the soup was a young Minnesota folkie who made a rapid and lasting impact singing both in Massachusetts and New York coffee houses by the name of Bob Dylan.

Dylan was signed, ironically enough, by Mitch Miller at Columbia, one of the last major stars he signed to that label. Yet one of Dylan's conditions was that neither Miller nor anyone else tamper with his repertoire, style or sound, so when his first albums were released,

the stark, naked power of his nasal, buzz-saw voice, accomplished guitar playing and powerful lyrics of social justice and an indictment of the status quo created a sensation.



It is doubtful that anyone reading this book can be unaware of Dylan's meteoric rise to fame, the social and political impact of such songs as "Blowin' In the Wind," "Talking World War III Blues," "Like a Rolling Stone," "It's A-Hard Rain Gonna Fall" and "Mr. Tambourine Man," or his eventual change from acoustic folk music playing to electric guitars that impacted an entire generation of pop musicians. But the *idea* of Bob Dylan, the models he created and what he stood for, was inevitably more important than the accomplishments of Bob Dylan. What Dylan proved, for the first time since Woody Guthrie and in a much more commercial atmosphere, was that the American ideal had nothing to do with the complex melodic and harmonic constructions of classical song, nor even of the melodic and harmonic improvisations of jazz singers, but a set of poetic, socially "powerful" lyrics set to simple tunes that everyone could hum or play.

This was the basis of the eventual takeover and marginalization of classical music and jazz. If you admitted that lyrics such as Dylan's (and Paul Simon's, and Joni Mitchell's, and others) were art, then ipso facto you had to agree that the songs they were set to were art.

And this aesthetic principle eventually worked its way into the African-American mainstream by way of "rap," which eventually became "hip-hop." Hip-hop is music reduced to its most basic components, rhythm and occasional vamps, over which words are spoken, not sung. It appealed to young males, not only in the black but also in the white communities, since its message was one of violence, sex, drugs and misogyny. The "talking blues" of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan was reduced to a formula that could be, and was, repeated ad nauseum.

It took nearly a decade for these musical trends to infest and infect the classical and jazz worlds but, when they did, the effects were permanent and, apparently, irreversible.

The pirates ascend

During the 1960s and '70s, a number of New York-based opera-lovers, knowing full well that often the best performances were those given "live" and not in the studio, began issuing LPs of concerts, complete operas and arias sung in actual performance by their idols. The principal players of this movement, in New York at least, were Edward J. Smith and Bill Violi. Smith had been at it since the mid-1950s, at first with a 78-rpm reissue label called TAP (Top Artists' Platters), but in the 1960s he introduced his EJS label. Violi's label was O.A.S.I. (acronym unknown, probably Operatic Artists [Something] International). Some of these, surprisingly, came from the ancient past: soprano Claudia Muzio, from 1932, in the first act of Puccini's *Tosca*; tenor Joseph Schmidt and soprano Maria Jeritza, singing together in concert at Madison Square Garden in 1937; Rosa Ponselle's complete *La Traviata* from the Metropolitan Opera in 1934, the 1936 London *Tristan* with Flagstad and Melchior, the great 1939 performance of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* with Elisabeth Rethberg, Giovanni Martinelli, Lawrence Tibbett, Leonard Warren and Ezio Pinza. But the bulk of them were live performances dating from the LP era, the early 1950s through the present day: Callas, Tebaldi,

Sutherland, Gedda, Corelli, Marilyn Horne and Inge Borkh in roles they sang in Europe but never in America or vice-versa.

Perhaps the commercial record companies wouldn't have cared so much if it weren't for the Callas performances, which sold like hotcakes around the world. Their fame was heightened by the fact that Callas herself sought them out and bought them, considering them better souvenirs of her public career than her studio recordings; their infamy was that they were usually pressed on third-grade vinyl with more hiss, ticks and pops than any contemporary commercial records. But sell they did, sometimes at inflated prices, among collectors who eagerly wanted to hear the artists they had loved listening to in a "live" setting.

The problem was that the influx of pirates, first from the classical world, eventually led to far less legitimate pirates of performances from the jazz world; then, eventually, to pirates from the rock and roll world. And when you began cutting into the rock and roll world, you began cutting into *real profits*, which is when the major (and minor) record labels began their endless stream of lawsuits.

The great individualists of the 1960s

Oddly enough, in spite of the plethora of recordings to emerge during the stereo era, very few were made of the great individualists, those artists who were most admired in person. Among those who were woefully under-recorded were sopranos Magda Olivero and Leyla Gencer, tenor Jon Vickers, cellist Janos Starker, pianists William Masselos and Rudolf Firkušný, conductors Jean Martinon and Hiroyuki Iwaki, and mezzo-soprano Tatiana Troyanos. One of the reasons they were under-recorded—and underrated—was that they did not push their careers the way more high-profiled artists did: all of them considered themselves artists first, singers or instrumentalists second. Their love for the music was so deep that they would never think of pressing record companies to capture their repertoire; they were willing to wait to be asked and, since they were not among the most popular or best-known artists, they patiently waited their turn. And, alas, some of their issued recordings did them scant justice, for instance Vickers' *Aida* with Leontyne Price in which the tenor's voice sounded dry and harsh, Troyanos' *Carmen* which sounded the same, and a brilliantly-conducted Beethoven symphony cycle by Iwaki that was both engineered and pressed atrociously.

Fortunately for them, Olivero, Vickers, Starker, Troyanos and Firkušný lived long enough to have collectors catch up with their artistry and seek their recordings out (both commercial and "live"), but Gencer, Masselos, Martinon and Iwaki were not so lucky. Their names and/or careers were not glamorous enough to sustain continued interest. Times had certainly changed, not only from the 78-rpm years but also from the early LP era, when labels actively sought out the greatest artists of their time, whether regional or international favorites, and allowed them to record their repertoire for worldwide distribution. As former classical record producer Brown Meggs put it in his semi-fictional novel, *Aria*, the new era of "record promotion" centered around a blend of young and established artists, thrown together into the primordial soup of the studio, then marketed like Campbell's soup or Tide detergent to a public of which only a small portion knew anything about music to begin with.

The most-recorded singer in history

Neither Peter Dawson nor Bing Crosby, both of whose careers on record lasted a half-century and both of whom made a plethora of records, was the most-recorded singer in history. That honor goes to German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who during the LP era

dominated the record racks. Most of his recordings were in his specialty field, German lieder: he was the first singer to record the complete songs of Schubert, Wolf and Strauss, some of them more than once (and some more than twice), but his catalog also includes a generous amount of cantatas, oratorios and operas. EMI, DGG and Decca-London all did well by his talents, but he also made records for RCA, Columbia and Orfeo.

With so much at stake, his various labels promoted his records—especially the lieder—



as the *sina qua non* of vocal art, proclaiming him the greatest lieder singer of the century. Yet though he was indeed very good, sometimes excellent, not all the records live up to their reputation; and, as we have seen, there were indeed some very fine lieder singers in the 78-rpm days as well as excellent artists who were contemporary with him. But it was another case of “Toscanini-itis,” of promoting one artist in a field above all others. No matter how fine he might have actually been, one could not in justice claim that his entire output was definitive.

And there was something else. Those who fought to get tickets to hear Fischer-Dieskau in person during his rare appearances outside of Germany and Austria were

somewhat disappointed by the quality of his voice. What sounded bright, warm and glowing on records sounded dull and gray in person. Yes, he had excellent phrasing and pitch, his styling was musical and he was a fine interpreter of words: his early Strauss songs for EMI and his operatic recordings of Iago in “Otello” and Rodrigo in “Don Carlo” are among the glories of the phonograph. But in person, the voice lacked the “cut” one heard when he sang before the microphone. Taken all in all, Fischer-Dieskau was a “mic singer.”

None of this is to denigrate him as an artist, only to point out how, once again, one’s ears could be fooled by what one heard on one’s stereo speakers. Recordings were not always reality. Yet once again, what was preserved on tape came to influence an entire generation of musicians.

“The music director of Europe”

Just as Fischer-Dieskau dominated German vocal recordings of the 1960s and ‘70s, Herbert von Karajan dominated orchestral and opera recordings. Supremely talented yet phlegmatic, Karajan molded the Berlin Philharmonic into what he liked to call “a cathedral of sound”: full, rich and burnished, with a depth and sheen lacking in the recordings of most of his contemporaries. Oddly enough, he always had problems with the music of Richard Wagner, conducting his operas far too slowly and with little forward momentum; yet as the one post-War German conductor who combined some of the best qualities of both Furtwängler and Toscanini, he was more than adept at the music of Beethoven, Brahms, Debussy, Sibelius and, surprisingly for a German conductor, Verdi. By the late 1960s he was so popular and influential that he was dubbed “the music director of all Europe.” Flutist James Galway, who played in his Berlin Philharmonic for several years during the 1970s, has stated that his orchestral concerts at the Berlin Philharmonie were the only ones he can recall that were *always* sold out. In truth, Karajan was a phenomenon, for all his faults the only post-Toscanini con-

ductor who could rival the older man for artistic and popular success.

Karajan was a strange combination of elitist and populist, autocrat and democrat, tyrant and tireless promoter of the arts. He was said to have robbed Salzburg and Berlin blind in his mad drive for power, but in truth no one can *take* such power; it must be granted, and freely, for any artist to have such advantage. There were other charismatic conductors who could have led Salzburg to glory—Prêtre, Kempe and Fricsay were likely candidates—but since Salzburg had to have Karajan, it had to pay his price. And his price, aside from his own exorbitant fee and the similarly exorbitant fees of his staff, was to produce the most sumptuous, realistic, glorious opera staging seen outside Bayreuth. Despite the exorbitantly high ticket prices and production costs, Salzburg's productions are now rightly seen as the beginnings of modern opera, where the acting and visual presentation was on equal footing with the musical. And, be it noted, other conductors and singers benefited as well.

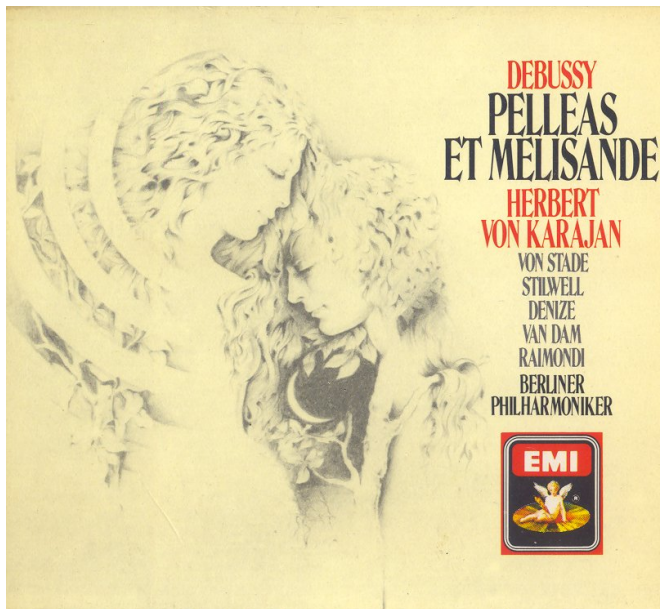
Dmitri Mitropoulos' 1958 production of "Elektra," Karl Böhm's 1962 "Iphigenie en Aulide," Zubin Mehta's 1965 production of "Die Entführung aus dem Serail" and Karajan's own 1980 "Falstaff" are now hailed as spectacular, once-in-a-lifetime productions whose aural remains are sold as the finest live performances of those operas ever captured, and they are; and none of it would have been possible without Karajan's dictatorial commands.

Karajan jacked up the live ticket prices to his Salzburg and Berlin performances to unbelievable heights, yet felt secure that his many hundreds of recordings (and, later, videos) would bring the highest degree of art to those classes who could not afford to go in person. In other words, he robbed the coffers of the German and Austrian governments and gouged

ticket prices for the rich so that ordinary people could benefit from the highest form of art it was in his power to achieve. Some critics disagree, but those few are rare. Most auditors would admit, if judging objectively, that at least a portion of his immense recorded output achieves artistic nirvana.

Unlike many other conductors—Toscanini excepted—Karajan actually accelerated his recording activity the older he got, and most critics agree that his recordings of the last twenty years of his life (1969-1989) were among his very greatest. Pride of place goes to the afore-mentioned Salzburg "Falstaff," arguably the greatest ever given of that

most difficult of comic operas, and his 1978 studio recording of Debussy's "Pelléas et Méli-



sande.” Before the latter came out, most listeners had come to think of the opera as wispy, ethereal, cerebral, due to the previous recordings in this vein by Roger Desdormiere and Ernest Ansermet. But Karajan, reverting to score directions, produced the most heated “Pelléas” since the days of Coppola and Monteux, conductors who had known Debussy and what he wanted. This recording also created the tradition of having Mélisande sung by a mezzo rather than a soprano by giving it to the high-lying mezzo voice of Frederica von Stade. Since its time of issue, more and more mezzos have performed this role which was once considered the exclusive domain of higher-lying voices.

His 1970s recordings of “Otello” and the Verdi Requiem were considered the finest since Toscanini, his “La Bohème” with Mirella Freni and Luciano Pavarotti was the benchmark recording for thirty years, and his last two complete Beethoven symphony cycles (1974-75 and 1982-84) provided listeners, between them, with the best modern performances of these immortal works. Likewise, his recordings of short works by Sibelius, the Shostakovich Tenth Symphony and Strauss’ “Ein Heldenleben” were the best of the modern era. Now that he is gone, his legacy is all that we have of him; and that legacy reflects his incredibly high standards and the particular style of music-making that he fervently believed in. Many hated him; some artists (particularly Nicolai Gedda) refused to work with him; yet two bona-fide plebians—tenor Jon Vickers and flutist James Galway—found his high standards and artistic genius just compensation for the financial gain he demanded for them.

Karajan’s Achilles’ heel was his taste in sopranos. He liked singers with a “vulnerable” sound, but unfortunately tended to push lighter voices into roles that were too heavy for them. The most infamous of his misjudgments was in pushing Mirella Freni, a fine light lyric soprano, into the much-too-heavy role of Aida; but he also pushed Helga Dernesch into the role of Isolde and Agnes Baltsa, a mezzo-soprano, into the high-lying role of Donna Elvira. Fortunately for posterity, these misjudgments have been either ignored or forgotten.

The “Solti Economy”: marketing the classics



Perhaps the only conductor, other than Karajan, who was as highly fêted and strongly marketed was Georg Solti. Solti was as popular in England and America as Karajan was in central Europe, thanks largely to the boost he received from John Culshaw and Terry McEwan at Decca-London records. Thanks to them, he was made music director of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1960 and held that post for a decade. Yet because so much of his recording time and energy were siphoned off by the production of the Wagner *Ring* recording, made in Vienna, there is very little in existence of this period. Perhaps his finest achievement with the Covent Garden forces on disc was the 1967 recording of Verdi’s “Don Carlo” with an exceptional international cast: the Italians Renata Tebaldi and Carlo Bergonzi, the German Fischer-Dieskau, American Grace Bumbry, Bulgarian Nicolai Ghiaurov and the Finnish bass Martti Talvala. That recording is still considered the benchmark classic by which not only recordings, but performances, of “Don Carlo” are judged.

In the early 1970s, Solti produced other complete opera sets that acquired benchmark

status, particularly Mozart's "Die Zauberflöte" and Wagner's "Tannhäuser." The "Tannhäuser," superbly conducted in the Toscanini vein with a sterling cast of singers, is still a classic, but his early "Zauberflöte" recording has since disappeared because of changes in performing style. Not only do we now use a lighter orchestra but also lighter voices: the big, powerful sounds of Cristina Deutekom as the Queen of the Night, Stuart Burrows as Tamino and Hermann Prey as Papageno are generally considered "old style" today, much as Fritz Wunderlich's full-blooded Mozart singing eventually disappeared. But there were other projects that catapulted Solti to the peaks of classical marketing, such as his Mahler symphony cycle (with both the London Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony orchestras), his recording of Bartók's "Concerto for Orchestra" and his Beethoven symphony cycle (both with Chicago).

Indeed, Solti's selection as the new music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in the early 1970s, replacing the media-unsavvy Jean Martinon, was widely hailed as one of the greatest coups of the era. Solti built up the orchestra to reflect his "wall-of-sound" approach, which thrilled many and annoyed a few, but more interesting was the way in which the American media wrote about him. Using purple prose cribbed from RCA's promotion of Toscanini, they credited him with building the Chicago orchestra into a virtuoso instrument for the very first time. This did not sit well with those who knew that Fritz Reiner, a fellow-Hungarian, had done the same thing in the 1950s, but Reiner was dead, his records could not compete with the new sound standard, and Solti was the media's new golden boy.

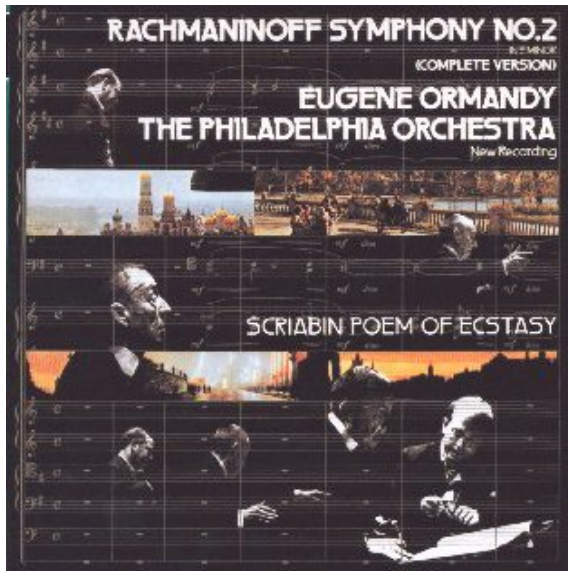
The differences between Karajan and Solti within the critical community were interesting. Whereas Karajan's recordings often received mixed reviews when first issued—among them his first and second Beethoven cycles, his "Fidelio," "La Bohème," "Otello," "Pelléas et Mélisande" and various symphonic works of Shostakovich, Sibelius and Strauss—the overwhelming preference for those recordings by record-buyers eventually turned them into classics. On the other hand, when Solti's recordings were first issued they generally received glowing reviews, sold well for a few years, but then faded away. This was particularly true of several of his complete opera recordings of the 1970s which featured strong conducting but flawed casts (particularly Wagner's "Der Fliegende Holländer" and "Die Meistersinger"), but also of the much-touted Mahler and Beethoven.

By the early 1980s, Solti's musical approach had mellowed from the sonically powerful but rhythmically staid style of his earlier years. He remade some of the Mahler symphonies in much better performances than earlier and began recording, and performing, more Mozart and Verdi than ever before, which by his own admission caused him to adopt a lighter touch, even with Wagner. The result was a series of recordings that not only received glowing reviews when issued but *have* become classics, among them Mozart's "Nozze di Figaro" and "Così fan tutte," Verdi's "Un Ballo in Maschera" and "La Traviata," Wagner's "Lohengrin" and a remake of "Die Meistersinger." Yet, oddly enough, towards the end of his life Solti fell out of favor with the critics. His Mozart, though lighter than in his early years, had been superseded by an entirely different aesthetic, and Wagner's music in general was becoming less popular by virtue of its overinflated length and silly plots based on legend. Except in Chicago, where he became a living legend, Solti ended his public career less universally admired than when he began it, sort of a crescendo-decrescendo effect that, ironically, endeared him to musicians more and more as the public cared less and less.

The Ormandy defection topples RCA

In 1968 Eugene Ormandy, the innocuous but best-selling conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra since 1934, made a new five-year deal with RCA Victor. RCA was so thrilled to

get what had once been their best-selling orchestra back in the fold that they set up unprecedented budgets and virtually sank their entire stock into what they hoped would be a Philadelphia infusion. But it backfired. By the late 1960s, classical listeners had tired of Ormandy, a



fine conductor who has not yet gotten his due (he was, for instance, a supreme conductor of ballet scores whose recording of Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" is still considered a classic, and his Mahler performances were much warmer and more musically exact than Bernstein's), but his repertoire was conventional and old-fashioned and the records barely sold. Norman Lebrecht, in *Who Killed Classical Music?*, points to this era as the virtual undoing of RCA as a major force in the classical record industry.

RCA tried to regain its luster by signing the Met's hot young conductor James Levine, soon to become (for a brief period) co-director of the house, and a stable of Met stars (Sherrill Milnes, Plácido Domingo, Montserrat Caballé, Fiorenza Cossotto, Renata Scotto) to support him. But this plan backfired, too, as none of those artists signed *exclusive* contracts with the label and all eventually defected elsewhere—Levine last, but certainly not least, to DGG and later Sony-CBS. In addition, none of the Levine-led opera recordings garnered very good press at the time with the exception of Puccini's "La Bohème," yet many of them—musically exacting and very well sung—have become standard listening for budding young singers and conductors. Unfortunately for RCA, and the record industry as a whole, this happened decades after they were originally released, much too late to do the label any good.

In a last-ditch effort to regain their toehold in the upper ranks of classical labels, RCA signed—once again, and for the last time—that ancient "dishonest musician," Leopold Stokowski. Because he was leading whipped-up performances of standard and slightly eccentric repertoire, Stokowski in old age became something of a phenomenon, just as pianist Eubie Blake did in the jazz world. Shuffling up to the podium with a painful gait, looking for all the world as if he would die on the way up there, Stokowski would suddenly raise his baton and give hair-raising performances of the classics. No matter that he lined seven French horns up in front of the strings to blast out the last movement of the Beethoven Seventh Symphony; no matter that he still had his violins play a split-second apart from each other to produce that lush but illegitimate sound; audiences loved him. It was another Phoenix story, an old guy who everyone had forgotten rising from the artistic dead to thrill a crowd. Like all musical phenomena, however, the public soon tired of him and his records stopped selling.

Changes in the early music scene

In 1966, Noah Greenberg died, and with him died a flame that had set early music alight and given it worldwide attention. His New York Pro Musica continued for another year or two, but could not survive without his uncanny sense of promotion. But in its wake had come a number of performers whose dedication to the music of the past was almost as intense as his own.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt, whose *Concentus Musicus Wien* had been around since the 1950s, now began to be recognized as a leader in “early instrument” performance. By the late 1960s early instrument players, and the reconstructed instruments themselves, had greatly improved over their previous models. Though many listeners could still not quite “take” to the straight, vibratoless string tone they produced, they could at least acknowledge that their playing was clean and precise, something that could not be said of their predecessors.

The British, leading away from the full-toned, romanticized kind of early music playing exemplified by Thomas Beecham, created a backlash school of playing and singing that was even more severe than Harnoncourt’s. Led by such musicians as David Munrow and Christopher Hogwood, they developed a style best described as emotional austerity. Everything had to be pin-neat, clean and “pure,” which to them meant no vibrato whatsoever, not even in vocal music. At first this was taken to be a quaint notion, but the research of musicologists was used to “prove” their position right and, since the records they made sold extremely well in England and Germany, they ipso facto became the standard by which all future performances would be judged.

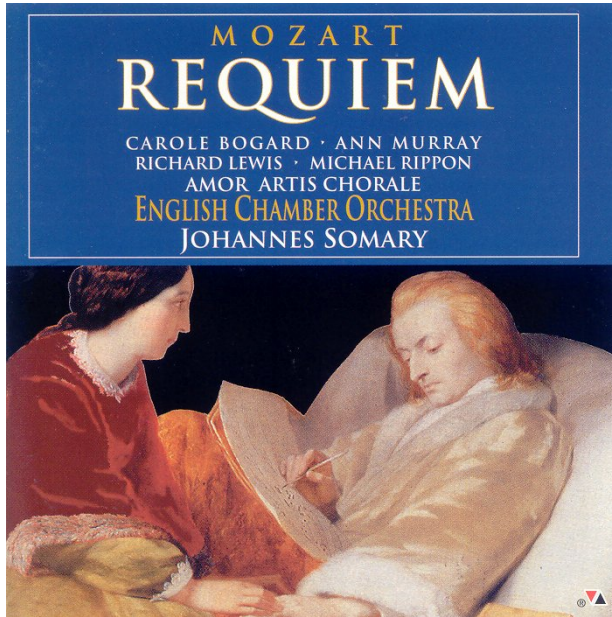
Not that there weren’t dissenters to this philosophy. In England, for instance, mezzo-soprano Janet Baker consistently failed to align herself with what some critics called “the bloodless school” of performance. Her recordings of Purcell, Handel, Monteverdi and Haydn were as openly emotional as her recordings of Mahler, Verdi and Schubert. At first they were well-received by critics but, as the “bloodless revivalists” took over the market, her kind of performances were brushed aside as old-fashioned.

In America, however, there were two performers whose work was well-received in its day and would eventually become the preferred style of early-music performance worldwide. One was Robert Shaw, the former chorus master for Toscanini. During the 1950s his Robert Shaw Chorale had suffered criticism for what many heard as clean but emotionless performances of Italian operas on RCA Victor; but in 1966 he recorded a complete “Messiah” with reduced choral and orchestral forces that still had an emotional impact. It is safe to say that his “Messiah” was a watershed performance: within a decade it had become the preferred recording that people bought each other for Christmas gifts, supplanting the massively-scored version by Ormandy, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The other performer whose work was quite revolutionary was soprano Carole Bogard. Young, blonde, and extremely pretty, Bogard could have chosen to sing virtually any repertoire she wished and been successful in it. Her full, warm yet ringing lyric soprano would have been the American equivalent of Mirella Freni, ideal as Mimi, Suzel, Adina, Micaela and Liu. But Bogard chose to sing the Baroque and pre-Baroque repertoire almost exclusively at a time when live performances were scarce and recordings even scarcer. The same year that Shaw recorded his ground-breaking “Messiah,” Bogard participated in an equally ground-breaking recording of Monteverdi’s opera “L’Incoronazione di Poppea.” Made in Oakland, California, the cast included soon-to-be-famous soprano Judith Nelson as Drusilla, former Pro Musica star tenor Charles Bressler as Nero, the superb bass Herbert Beattie as Seneca, and a very small group of instruments conducted by Alan Curtis. Released on the small, independent Cambridge label, it had little promotion and what would in the future be termed “no market share,” yet it sold and continued to sell, well, into the early 1980s for the simple reason that it was a great performance.

Surprisingly, Robert Shaw did very little to follow the period style of his “Messiah” recording, choosing rather to become an orchestral conductor. His years with the Atlanta Symphony were later well-documented by Telarc Records: solid, musical yet slightly dispassionate performances which, like his Italian opera recording with his chorus, failed to satisfy as

well as his “Messiah” or his earlier work. (Francis Poulenc, listening to a Shaw recording of one of his works in the late 1940s, proclaimed him a “genius.”) But Bogard went from strength to strength, singing recitals of French and American songs at a time when both took a back seat to German lieder, and giving live performances of Baroque opera whenever she had the chance. She also continued to make records for Cambridge, including Handel’s “Tamerlano” in 1970 with Gwendolyn Killebrew, Joanna Simon, tenor Alexander Young and con-



ductor John Moriarty, which became a model for Handel performances thereafter. It was the first recording of a Handel opera to use only a harpsichord and cello to accompany the recitatives – a practice taken for granted today. Among her non-Cambridge recordings was a Mozart “Requiem” for Vanguard in 1975, conducted by Johannes Somary, again with an established tenor (Richard Lewis) and an up-and-coming mezzo (Ann Murray), which still stands as the best performance to combine scrupulous musicianship and emotional feeling.

The early music performing style wars were thus set, with the more emotional style of the Americans against the emotionally staid style of the British. And, of

course, there have been crossovers on both sides. Many modern American groups subscribe to the British way while several leading British musicians, among them Andrew Parrott and John Eliot Gardiner, are just as adamant about performing the music with more feeling. And some artists, like soprano Emma Kirkby and baritone David Thomas, take a middle view which, ironically, puts them at the disposal of *both* schools.

Conversely, the Europeans tend to lean more towards the American than the British view. Even Harnoncourt, the dean of early-music directors, has always stressed emotionality in his performances, even when his tempi and phrasing have seemed quirky to some listeners, and many of those who followed in his footsteps—Reinhard Goebel, Marc Minkowski and countertenor-turned-conductor René Jacobs—feel the same way. Their performances, like those of Curtis, Somary and Gardiner, simply will not let go of the emotional aspect of the music. So too are the performances, both as conductor and at the harpsichord, of Gustav Leonhardt, whose 1972 recording of Bach’s “Brandenburg Concertos” are virtually the only ones that can rival Benjamin Britten’s in terms of elegance and sweep. Because of this, it is not at all surprising that American William Christie, whose work was virtually ignored in Britain for years, has become a performing idol in France giving concerts of nothing but Baroque and pre-Baroque music.

“Pop” goes the Classics

One of the many albums that jazz pianist Bill Evans recorded was one with a symphony orchestra conducted by Claus Ogerman. Ogerman wrote what could be termed “easy listening” arrangements of pieces by Bach, Scriabin, De Falla and others, against which Evans played jazz improvisations. If the pianist had been a popular one, such as Liberace or the duo

of Ferrante and Teicher, it would not have been taken seriously, but because Evans was a great musician it was enormously influential. Eventually, this approach became the norm by which casual listeners judged “classical” music: the “mellow with Mozart, zone out with Zemlinsky” philosophy that haunts classical music to the present day.

But there were other trends afoot that were nearly as damaging. One was a proliferation of “greatest hits” albums that reduced the great classical works to single movements, sometimes even just part of a movement, giving the listener only the part of the work which had become “popular.” Another was the playing of classical works by rock groups, such as Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s treatment of Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.” And the third was a visual presentation of classical musicians as pop performers, playing legitimate classical works in their entirety, but doing so while wearing Carnaby Street fashions and accompanied by light shows. This was the milieu in which organist Virgil Fox and the classical “supergroup” Tashi worked. Yet, oddly, Fox was vilified for his participation in rock concerts while Tashi was praised.

Perhaps one of the least remembered but most highly damaging of albums was one called “The Naked Carmen,” in which Bizet’s masterpiece was presented as an outmoded, corny, even dumb musical treatment of Prosper Mérimée’s novelette. In the Hippie era, when almost anything that had drug-influenced electric guitarists playing behind surreal lyrics were taken as seriously as Dylan’s wonderful poetry, denigrating classical music like this was virtually a death-knell for any music that was complex or intellectually interesting.

Dueling tenors

In the late 1960s-early ’70s two operatic tenors, Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo, decided that they wanted fame and fortune well beyond what any other tenor since Caruso had achieved—in fact, they wanted the same kind of press that such prime donne as Callas, Sutherland and Leontyne Price had. To this end they hired high-powered press agents to promote their names like chewing gum. Pavarotti, whose high, dry voice had a good amount of “ping” on top, was promoted as “the king of the high C’s,” while Domingo, with a less startling instrument but superb musicianship, was promoted as the most versatile tenor of his day.

Domingo was also the most active tenor of any generation. As of this writing (April 2006), his now-44-year career is not yet over. He has gone through various changes in voice production and style during that period, some years being very obviously better than others; sometimes the voice sounds open and free, other times it sounds hard and dry. Yet he has remained recognizably himself. Pavarotti, on the other hand, sang essentially the same way throughout his career, though in the last decade of his public career he had to foreshorten his range to avoid the very high C’s that made his name.

Both tenors have left us some very respectable work on records, but Domingo’s oeuvre has, by virtue of its wide range, been the more interesting of the two. Not too many tenors who started out and specialized in the Italian repertoire would venture to sing, let alone record, Weber’s “Oberon,” Mozart’s “Idomeneo” or Wagner’s “Lohengrin,” all of which Domingo did with distinction. What is more open to doubt is whether or not he has really done well by one of his signature roles, that of Verdi’s Otello.

Domingo has left us one live performance of the opera, conducted by Carlos Kleiber, and three studio recordings (conducted, respectively, by James Levine, Lorin Maazel and Myung-Whun Chung). These are certainly intelligent, well-thought-out readings. The Kleiber live performance is by far the most dramatically intense—indeed, at times (as in “Dio! mi potevi scagliar”) Domingo leaves the written notes entirely, so wrapped up in the

character is he—while the last studio recording probably represents the best balance between singing and acting. Yet Domingo’s voice is that of a lyric tenor; for all the darkening of sound that age has brought to it, it simply does not have the power and drive that Verdi envisioned when he wrote the role for Francesco Tamagno, owner of the most powerful Italian tenor voice of his day. While it is true that, through time, certain roles originally sung by average-sized voices have eventually gone to “vocal cannons” (among them Leonore in “Fidelio,” Bellini’s Norma, Elisabeth in “Tannhäuser” and Donna Anna in “Don Giovanni”), Otello is one of those roles which, like Wagner’s Brünnhilde, simply cannot be sung—at least in the opera house—by lighter voices for the simple reason that they cannot cleave the orchestra. Domingo has managed to do so by having his conductors tone the orchestra down at climaxes, but to me this is not giving Verdi his just due. There are cogent arguments today, for instance, about the validity of playing Bach on modern violins that are often ignored; and at least in the case of one role, Britten’s Peter Grimes, the much larger voice of Jon Vickers moved the role up several notches from the much lighter tone of the role’s creator, Peter Pears. But one can certainly go *up* in volume from a starting-point of lighter scoring and give a valid interpretation (though, of course, the quality of the interpreter must be taken into consideration along with the loudness factor). What I question is whether or not Domingo’s Otello gave, or gives, the listener the full value or impact that Verdi and Boito intended in the role. These are the sort of questions that phonography forces us as listeners to answer, not necessarily for our sake but for future generations who will be told (at least by the record companies) that Domingo’s Otello was a benchmark in its time.

Leif Segerstam: “Failed” composer, “great” conductor

One of the most interesting cases of a classical musician transformed by the media from one type into another was that of the Finnish composer-violinist-conductor Leif Segerstam. Widely considered in his home country as one of the most interesting and outstanding of modern composers, the BIS label worked overtime in the late 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s to build up his status, similar to the way Decca-London worked to market Britten. But whereas Britten’s music was generally accessible to mass listeners, Segerstam’s was not. Though not cold and forbidding like the music of Lutoslawski, Babbitt or Luigi Nono, Segerstam’s music, with its atonal cries and shrieks, its bending of notes like a jazz musician and free rhythm which often had no meter or pulse for the listener to follow, left the majority of listeners baffled. He conducted his “Divertimento,” “Sketches from Pandora,” “Concerto Serioso for Violin and Orchestra,” “Three Moments of Parting” and various “Orchestral Diary Sheets” every chance he got, including during his stints as a guest conductor with various orchestras worldwide, yet ironically these performances established his pre-eminence as a conductor of others’ music rather than as a conductor-composer like Mahler, or even like Bernstein. BIS records continued to issue his music well into the late 1980s, but by that time



his compositions had even come to be disliked by certain Finnish critics as well as international ones.

Interestingly, Segerstam as a conductor of others' music is good but not always first choice. This is not to demean his talents in any way, only to point out that by divorcing one side of his musical abilities from the other, the record companies are diminishing his value. As a combination composer-conductor, he is virtually without peer in the classical world; as a conductor, period, he is just another name in a long list of those the record companies like but have trouble promoting. Among his finest performances of another's music is the complete performance of Berg's opera "Wozz-ek" given at Stockholm and issued on the Naxos label, but even the very finest of his recordings of others' work cannot compare to the fire, passion and glow he brings to his own music. During the 1970s, Bis and a few other labels also recorded his startlingly original string quartets as well. These have disappeared completely from the catalogs and further diminish his exceptional talents.

I mention the Segerstam situation because I happen to be extremely fond of his music, and I know the circumstances surrounding this particular case, but I am sure that there are others who have been similarly treated by the media. Artur Schnabel, for instance, was a modern composer and a good one, but only a very few of his own works were ever recorded and none by he himself. In the modern world, there are many instances of composers whose works are never recorded at all, no matter how high the quality, and those whose works are recorded but in performances of inferior quality. We shall discuss some of these in the next chapter.

"Dynaflex" and the oil crisis

As the late 1960s wore on, it started to become apparent that oil supplies, controlled by Arab nations, were becoming more and more expensive. RCA Victor, in an effort to save oil, created a super-thin vinyl record which was dubbed "Dynaflex." This was the "record that wobbled": if you held a Dynaflex record by the outer edges and shook it up and down, it would literally make a flapping sound, it was so thin. But Dynaflex had its problems. Some of the records were so thinly pressed that, when playing side A, you could hear some of the music "bleed" through from side B; others had the annoying habit of curling up permanently. (One friend of mine had a Dynaflex album that shrunk itself up into a bowl shape. She had to package it in a box four inches high to send back to RCA for a replacement disc.)

Labels that didn't follow RCA's suit found themselves in trouble. By 1972, there was



an "oil crisis" that caused motorists to line up for gas, only being able to buy it on alternate days of the week. The record companies soon found themselves forced to use more and more recycled vinyl for their records, with disastrous consequences. The reconstituted vinyl was coarser, with more surface noise, ticks and pops even when new than was previously evident. American Columbia suffered the worst: their LPs of the 1970s, identified by their characteristic dark grey label with "Columbia" encircling its diameter in ochre lettering, quickly became identified with shoddy production values. By 1975, Columbia could not even sell many copies of their most prestigious classical albums.

Partly as a consequence of this, Columbia joined forces with EMI to produce “quadraphonic” records. These were LPs in which not two but four discrete signals were embedded in the finished product. One did not need a special stylus to play quadraphonic records, but one *did* need a special amplifier and twice the number of speakers, strategically placed “just so” in one’s living room in order to produce the proper soundstage. Not too surprisingly, however, the only composers whose work benefited from quadraphonic sound were Berlioz and Wagner, the two composers most interested in creating “sound in space” in addition to the usual compositional values. A few years later, quadraphonic disappeared into the same black hole as Columbia’s “Vivi-Tonal” records of the 1920s and RCA’s “Dynagroove.”

During the 1970s, too, the wealthy young white underclass who had been the Hippies of the 1960s were educating and re-educating themselves in an effort to avoid the Vietnam War draft. In their pursuit of protected student status, they discovered that in the work world, “knowledge is power,” and having an advanced degree gave them prestigious jobs upon graduation. Among these prestigious jobs were those in the media, radio and television, where they began as lower-echelon apprentices but eventually rose to positions of power. Yet, oddly, very few of them carried over the liberal ideals of their youth. What they fed off was the power they had, and they realized that power meant pleasing the establishment. And the establishment no longer wanted classical music, or jazz, or even folk. All they wanted was the various forms of rock music that these various streams had morphed into.

At about the same time, the public school system slowly ended music education in favor of more physical education. As many scribes since have pointed out, it was not a lack of physical education that led to Americans becoming more corpulent, but a lessening of fiber in the diet and a proliferation of fast-food junk, but since the corporate structure wished to promote this as much as rock music, who were we to dissent? So we pushed our children into organized soccer and karate practice and away from subjects like music and poetry that stimulated creative thinking. We were headed, as Allan Bloom put it, for “The Closing of the American Mind”; and, as America went, so went the world.